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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Edinburgh.—The opening address will be delivered towards the end of October. Programme for the session 1898-99 will be in the hands of the members early in the month. These, and all papers relating to the work of the P.N.E.U., may be had on application to the Hon. Secretary, Mrs. Berry Hart, 29, Charlotte Square.

Farnworth and Bolton.—The first meeting of the season will be held in October, when Miss Simpson, of Leeds, will address the members. It is hoped that the branch will have the pleasure of listening to lectures from Mrs. Curwen and Miss Mason during the month.

Eastbourne.—The autumn session will open in October, when Mrs. Steinthal will give the address, "Professions for Girls." November, Mdlle. Duriaux, "The Art of Teaching a Foreign Language." December, Herbert P. Garrod, Esq , "Co-education."

Folkestone.—This branch has made a good start under a new President, Lady Jane Taylor. During the past six months many new members have joined. The lectures have been interesting and well attended. Autumn and winter meetings will be arranged shortly.

Derby.—A pleasant excursion in connection with this branch took place on September 8th, conducted by Mr. Arnold Bemrose, who gave some account of forest trees.

THE

PARENTS' REVIEW

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

OF HOME-TRAINING AND CULTURE.

"Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life."

ON OBSERVATION.*

By H. Laing Gordon, M.D.

I do not know any old saying which is more misleading than that which runs "It is never too late to mend," when applied, as I have heard it, to the process of education. There are some persons who contend that education may be left entirely to the school-teacher, and that if any faults are acquired previous to school-life they can easily be "knocked out" by scholastic influence. In the estimation of such persons habit and character grow without direction, and if they are asked why these grow satisfactorily in some and unsatisfactorily in other children, they probably mutter something about "instinct" or "heredity." Heredity indeed, although answerable for some physical and mental defects, is too often used as a cloak to ignorance and made the idle excuse for the neglect and shortcomings of parents, who are quite ready to join in throwing upon their slumbering ancestors the responsibility for their own faults. By adhering to facts and avoiding fallacious deductions we shall find that the environment of the child—physical, mental, moral and spiritual—plays such a part in the formation of character as throws the influence of heredity into the shade. We parents are prominent features of this environment. Our influence is always at work, whether we are conscious of it or not; imitation and suggestion are ever quietly doing their work for either good or evil. It is no more than a simple duty that our influence should be a conscious one for right from the outset. Good habits—physical, mental, moral and spiritual—must be developed from the earliest day onwards if the object of our care is to be turned out, in the best sense, a man or a woman. It is very often indeed too late to mend, but it is never too early to begin. The older we get the more firmly do our habits, good or evil, become rooted in us, and the more difficult does it become to extirpate them or implant opposing ones. But the subject of Habit is not our concern to-night. We will grant that the formation of correct habits is a leading principle of true education, and proceed to a special consideration of that habit by which all real and valuable knowledge is reached—the habit of observation.

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* Read before the Forest Hill Branch, P.N.E.U., March, 1898.

"Good observation," says Professor Sully, "consists in careful and minute attention to what is before us." This general and simple definition implies not only the possession of special senses and the proper exercise of them, but also the faculty of patience and a knowledge of the value of time. It is possible to *perceive* an object without *observing* it. Thus we may pass a lamp-post in the street every day and perceive its presence without observing its height and shape, the substance of which it is made, the mode in which it is fastened in the ground, the kind of lamp and burner with which it is fitted, and the other numerous details which go to make it an instrument for distributing a given quantity of light over a certain area.

The chief essentials concerned in producing a proper power of observation, broadly speaking, are :—

(1.) The proper management of the mental process of Attention.

(2.) The proper training of the physical senses.

Let us first, very briefly, consider the Attention, and certain facts concerning it which experience teaches us and psychology and physiology endorse.

Every teacher knows that the anaemic child with its poorly-nourished brain and nervous system is capable of little valuable attention, while the healthy child with a vigorous circulation has strong nerve-cells capable of gratifying development. Here is an obvious parental duty—to send the child to school with a body and brain equal to the task of assimilating instruction. How much could be said on this subject! The teacher's duty is no less obvious—to impart instruction in such a manner and under such conditions and surroundings as exercise the nerve-cells but do not injuriously exhaust their energy. How much might be said also on this subject! Without a doubt nature demands and science teaches in no uncertain voice, that several hours a day—hours on which encroachment by preparation or impositions and other abominations must be rigidly forbidden—ought to be devoted to physical recreation out of doors. The proper hours for this recreation are when the sun is shining and the air is full of oxygen ; when every cell of the youthful body pines for the open air. And I mean *real* recreation entered into with abandonment, lessons and everything intellectual being utterly forgotten for the time. Physical deportment and culture are all very well in their place, but like crocodile walks over hard pavements or round parks they are inadequate; they lack the essential feature of recreation—freedom.

Attention, then, consumes nerve-energy and must be conserved ; but even in a healthy individual with well-developed nerve-cells it can be directed to an object with profit for only a limited period. Thus whist, when properly played, requires very careful attention ; when playing for a prolonged period some persons get muddled and forget the cards, their attention being overtaxed. Individuals vary of course in this respect, but the best players seldom play through long sittings; they know the value of conserving their nerve-energy.

You will prove another fact regarding attention—that it cannot be forced—if you take an inartistic friend round a picture-gallery. However polite he may be, his yawns and bored look will soon betray his want of attention to that which does not interest him; and you, yourself, will illustrate the last point to which I referred, by getting a headache if you try to do too many rooms of the gallery at one visit.

There is one more important fact about attention—monotony tends to destroy it or at least to send it too sleep. The evergreen laurel bush which remains practically unchanged through all the seasons of the year, has not the interest for us which we find in the rose-bush, as we watch it shoot and bud, burst, bloom, fruit, and fade. When objects for which familiarity has bred our neglect are presented in a new light to us, our attention is at once engaged. In the light of recent events we all to-day are familiar with and interested in the coastlines of China and of Cuba, about which a few months ago we thought little and cared little. We might very well spend the evening discussing attention, but I have said enough to show that it is a subject worthy of much thought from us as parents, and to indicate how necessary it is for correct observation.

I turn now to the second essential for the production of a good observing faculty, viz., the proper training of the physical senses.

As you are well aware, we possess five special senses—those of seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. Observation requires the use of not the sense of sight only, as is sometimes supposed, but also of the other four senses. An object has not been properly observed which has been only looked at, however carefully. The judge at an horticultural exhibition does not only look at the vegetables and fruits laid out for competition. He also feels, smells, and tastes them, and would also listen if experience had not told him this was unnecessary.

An eminent but now deceased medical teacher had an excellent method of practically illustrating the value of observation. He had upon his table a glass containing a fluid which was very nasty to the special senses, especially to the taste; with this he demonstrated to his students the correct method of observing such a fluid, and then handed it to the class, requesting each one to observe for himself. They looked, listened, felt, smelt, as he had done; but their faces betrayed that the tasting was an unpleasant process—some of them indeed shirked it. When they had all finished, “Gentlemen,” he said, “none of you have good observing powers; you saw me look, listen, feel, and smell, but you didn’t observe that I dipped my forefinger in and tasted my middle finger!”

If we wish our children to be correct observers, we cannot afford to neglect the training of any one of the senses. Smell and taste are as important as sight, hearing, and touch, and are capable of development to such a degree as astonishes those who have allowed them to remain latent if not to wither altogether in their own persons. Our knowledge is merely the evidence of our senses. What we know is only what our own senses have told us. The utterances of others by word

or writing are not knowledge to us if they do not satisfy our various senses. You may read in a book that a rose smells sweet, but you do not know it until you have taken a rose and applied it to your own nostrils.

If we can use our senses aright, true knowledge is an open book to us; it is sealed if the development of them has been neglected. The better trained our senses are, the better our attention is, then the better is our capacity for acquiring sound knowledge. I do not mean by this that we are to make our children little prigs, refusing to believe absolutely anything except that which they themselves can prove; such children would never be educated at all, and the idea of their existence is absurd. There is, of course, a very large and important place for authority in education; and the child with soundly trained special senses will grow into a man capable of distinguishing between real and false authority. There is a great deal of false authority abroad nowadays; indeed it injures and obscures truth almost as much as the blind regard for authority obscured all that was valuable in science up to quite recent times. No science can, of course, exist without the aid of authority—real authority—but *false* authority is a dangerous enemy. The popular mind to-day has a regard which is marvellous in its intensity, for any utterance which appears in print—whether in book or newspaper form. The daily papers indeed are allowed to form our opinions for us in political, social, and even, I regret to say, scientific matters. This pseudo-science of the daily and weekly papers is most regrettable, and we ought to beware of any so-called scientific news or opinions in any paper which we do not know to have a properly-qualified science-editor. Happily, however, newspapers perish and are forgotten, while science endures; but this kind of false authority greatly impedes the development of sound scientific knowledge in the popular mind. Mothers frequently say they have done so-and-so because they “read it in an article somewhere,”—how necessary then that these articles should contain truth and only truth. The average mind believes an article, signed or unsigned—no matter as long as it is in print—rather than the mere word of an army of experienced authorities. Newspapers and books are all very well in their way, but must not be allowed to take the place of knowledge gained through the exercise of our own powers of observation. No science can be learnt from a text-book without a parallel study of nature herself, who will answer questions for us far better than any book or any lecturer if we only know how to ask her—if, in other words, we are acute observers. If we recognize this simple fact we shall not be guilty of exaggeration in saying that the "science" taught in some schools from elementary text-books only, with a view to "passing" as many pupils as possible at South Kensington examinations, is worse than useless.

Correct observation leads us to assume that happy frame of mind midway between blind belief in authority and out-and-out scepticism, which is best described as "the open mind."

But our senses may be well trained and our powers of attention may be good, and yet we may be bad observers, because we draw incorrect inferences from our sense-experiences. So that we require well-balanced as well as well-trained senses. We require self-control to make ourselves adhere rigidly to the object under examination, and save us from over-much imagination. It is quite possible to see in an object that which does not actually exist, because we have imagined from what we have heard or from past experience that we would see it. This has been recently illustrated by an unfortunate railway-signalman, who imagined he had passed through one of the regular daily trains, and allowed a disastrous collision. On the other hand we overlook details in an object which we had not expected, because we had never before heard of them; when our attention is directed to them we wonder how we were so stupid as not to have seen them. These facts are concisely expressed by Mr. Herbert Spencer when he attributes the difficulties of accurate observation to, first, presence of hypothesis, and secondly, absence of hypothesis.

There is no better scene for the study of variations in human powers of observation than a court of law. A. will stand in the witness-box and swear, as he thinks with perfect truth, that he saw a certain object in a certain place at a certain time; while B. who follows him—an equally truthful man in the ordinary sense—who was present at the same time, will swear the exact opposite. Then again, although A. and B. may agree as to what they saw, and as to the time

and place, one may exhibit self-control and adhere only to facts, while the other allows the cross-examining counsel to lead him to over-reach his observations in inferences which are incorrect and obscure the truth. There is no place where it is more difficult to tell the truth than the witness-box—I had almost said, no place where less truth is told. Certainly there is no more dangerous place for a bad observer, and no more difficult place for a good observer—with a clever opposing counsel in front of him.

I think I have said enough to show that good observation depends chiefly upon the training of our special senses and of our attention, and that there are many difficulties to be encountered. I have tried to give common-sense reasons, rather than to enter into a psychological discussion, which would be very interesting, but beyond our province to-night. I wish now to direct your attention to the practical value of the possession of good powers of observation, in the hope of furnishing material for further thought and discussion.

First, how may we derive profit from the power of observation? It is scarcely necessary to suggest to you that the acute observer gains the mastery in the struggle for existence. Our greatest men have all been acute observers in some line, but generally all-round; their senses were trained carefully and wisely, usually by themselves, often by their mothers. The great discoveries which benefit humanity through all time are made, not in sudden inspiration by untrained observers, but after long and patient observation on the part of earnest workers.

Harvey's revelation of the circulation of the blood was the result of laborious anatomical investigations, Newton worked and studied for years before he gave the world the fact associated with his name, and Darwin in our own day revolutionised modern thought with theories founded on the most marvellous collection of facts. Morton and Simpson discovered the anaesthetic properties of ether and chloroform respectively after long series of observations and experiments, in which each fearlessly risked his life. A study of the life of any one of these men convinces us that whatever was the quality which stamped each one as a genius, they all possessed carefully-trained senses and were masters of the art of observation. Above all, we learn that they went to nature, whether in the field or the workshop or the laboratory, for their facts—not to authority, not to books.

Excellence in one particular line of observation does not, however, constitute success in life. It is necessary to be a good all-round observer. From the utilitarian point of view the study of mankind is the most valuable study for the man who wishes to "get on." It is the boast of one of our leading commercial princes that he began life by sleeping under the counter of a grocer's shop as a shop-boy. It was not the accurate knowledge of butter and bacon, of tea and of sugar thus gained, which alone caused him to rise to his present position. Dozens of boys have slept under counters and never risen higher than shopwalkers. This man was an acute observer of mankind and a careful calculator of supply and demand, of probabilities and chances—ever ready to take the current when it served. Over and above his special knowledge he possessed those faculties which go to make a good business man—not the least of which is the power of accurately observing one's fellow-men. The better all-round observers we are the better we ought to succeed.

The most casual study of almost any ancient classical writer teaches us that our remote forefathers were adepts in the study of nature, and especially of human nature, which does not appear to have altered with the progress of time. It would be idle nonsense to say that knowledge, aided by modern methods of observation, has not progressed ; but it is a fact that science has proved much of ancient, apparently empirical knowledge, to have been correct. It is equally true that in some matters our knowledge has not advanced further than it was a thousand years or so ago. We no longer believe that the planets and signs of the zodiac control the various parts of the physiognomy—that Venus presides over the nose, Capricorn rules the chin, and Taurus controls the forehead between the eyebrows. But long and careful observation through ages has confirmed the ancient judgment as to the qualities betokened by the nose, that a square massive jaw and chin indicate strength and determination, and that a broad space between the eyebrows shows that the possessor has a good faculty of observation. We all know the broad difference between the intellectual forehead and "the straightened forehead of the fool." So did the Arabians. But we know no more than they did why our features tell such tales.

Our actions, of course, depend upon our intelligences, and our intelligences vary according to the training to which our senses have been subjected. The acute observer of mankind learns to classify men, and is able to anticipate an individual's actions by determining to which class he belongs. I believe Mr. Cecil Rhodes—whom we all acknowledge to be a leader of men, whatever we think of his methods—attributes his success in life to this power of reading his fellow-men and of making use of them.

"Immense conclusions," says Oliver Wendell Holmes, "touching our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour may be reached by means of very insignificant premises. This is eminently true of manners and forms of speech ; a movement or a phrase often tell you all you want to know about a person."

We cannot all tell at a glance to what part of the country a person belongs by observing the colour and nature of the mud upon his boots, as did Sherlock Holmes, but the average observer can tell the clergyman—even in mufti—the man of law, medicine, or business, and perhaps most easily of all, the schoolmaster, after a few minutes' conversation, or even in passing in the street, such is the stamp placed upon the individual by the practice of any one particular calling. The intonation of the voice in perhaps a single word may reveal where our early training was received. A Scotchman may be betrayed solely by the mixing up of his "shalls" and "will," while the Irishman may sometimes be detected only by his habit of racy speech, or of saying a good deal more than he means. Manners, we know, make man, and betray the rank of society whence we have sprung, hard as we may struggle to conceal it.

[The lecturer here showed some diagrams to illustrate how much the observation of a man's posture in daily life may show.]

The key-note of success in the professions of law and medicine is observation. The lawyer cannot afford to disregard the smallest sign which gives him a hint as to the characters of the parties with whom he is concerned, any more than the medical man dare overlook what to the unskilled may appear but trivial indications of disease. In medicine, as well as in law—indeed in all professions—to be able to read character by skilful and rapid observation, is almost as important as strictly technical knowledge.

For mothers especially is it important to be able to diagnose character in the child with rapidity and accuracy; to be able to appreciate the mental struggles and the little psychical developments, which often take place amidst tears and leave an indelible impression upon the character. I daresay we all remember these little inward struggles, very real to us at the time; occasions when a word in season from a parent, who understood and sympathised, would be of lasting value.

These general remarks may suffice to remind you, in a passing manner, of the value and profit of true observation in every-day life. But in good observation we have not only an equipment for the battle of life in our own line of work; we have also a means of enjoying the work of others, and you will understand this in recalling the pleasure to be derived from picture-galleries, theatres, or museums. For the sake of example, let us take the enjoyment to be derived from our standard literature—after the manner suggested by Mr. Halleck, in his *Development of the Central Nervous System*—by him or her, who possesses well-trained senses, and who is in a position to personally recall images similar to those conjured up by the author. Taking the senses in rotation, and beginning with that of sight, remember Imogen's heart-uttered cry—

> "If there be
> Yet left in heaven as small a drop of pity
> As a wren's eye, feared gods, a part of it."

—who can appreciate the depth of the heroine's grief and the perfection of the author's image, who cannot recall the piteous expression of the tiny eye of the wren?

Shakespeare appeals frequently also to the sense of hearing, as where Portia says—

> "Let music sound, while he doth make his choice;
> Then if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,
> Fading in music.
> . . . . .
> He may win,
> And what is music then? Then music is
> Even as the flourish when true subjects bow
> To a new-crowned monarch; such it is
> As are those dulcet sounds in break of day
> That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear,
> And summon him to marriage."

The third special sense—that of touch—is suggested when Romeo sighs—

> "See how she leans her head upon her hand.
> Oh! that I were a glove upon that hand,
> That I might touch that cheek."

The same poet had a keenly-developed sense of smell, of which he made constant use in such passages as the following—

> "Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia
> Will not sweeten this little hand."

Many passages in Shakespeare awake in us also the sense of taste, as where he speaks of sucking "the sweets of sweet philosophy." And you will remember also Falstaff's description of the twofold operation of a cup of "good sherris-sack," in which one can almost hear the knight smacking his lips. Everyone may recall in Shakespeare, as well as in the works of our other great authors, passages which require for their appreciation adequate sense development. Shakespeare indeed so frequently refers by name to the five senses, that he seems to be endeavouring to indicate their importance to us.

The senses must be properly educated before the good things of this earth, of God's creation and of man's manufacture, can be appreciated. But there is something more. The soul, as well as the material mind, must also be developed. "True education," says Professor Michael Foster, "is that which brings forward together all the powers of the whole being—body, mind, and soul." How beautiful may be the soul nourished in a body, trained to understand the good things of this earth, is well shown in *John Inglesant* by the character of that old country clergyman, who earnestly desired that his epitaph might be that he was "full of cares and full of years, of neither weary, but full of hope and of heaven." "Faded flowers," says this gentle-natured man, "have something to me miraculous and supernatural about them; though, in fact, it is nothing wonderful that the texture of a flower being dried, survives. It is not in the flower, but in our immortal spirit that the miracle is. All those delightful thoughts that come into my mind when I look at this flower—thoughts and fancies and memories—what are they but the result of the alchemy of the immortal spirit, which takes all the pleasant fragile things of life, and transmutes them into immortality in our own nature!"

Observation then,—careful attention with well-trained senses—has its value and profit in the knowledge and enjoyment of all things animate and inanimate obtained by its exercise, and in the power it confers on the possessor for the battle of life.

And now, how are our senses best trained? There is no time to discuss this question adequately to-night, but I will briefly refer to one or two important points. First, our senses can only be properly trained in youth. If our receptive and highly sensitive brain-cells are exercised in early life, their strength, power, and numbers will increase; neglect them in childhood, and not only will their numbers decrease, but their quality will deteriorate. The more complete is this early training by proper stimulation, the greater are the possibilities in later life. The cells neglected in youth will not develope properly in adult life; the fewer our developed brain-cells, the greater our individual limitations. The size of our brains is of no importance—lots of dolts and dullards have big heads, just as a large cask may contain bad wine. It is the quality and number and relationships of our developed brain-cells which make the difference between brain and brain, between intellect and intellect. The man who has not learnt to ride in youth will never sit a horse successfully, certainly will not confidently face a post and rail, when he makes the attempt in adult life. Similarly, he whose senses have been neglected in youth, cannot in later years exhibit keen observing powers, nor ever pay careful attention to objects requiring patient detailed examination. The foundation of all our habits of body and mind is laid in youth. There is little time in after life to unlearn bad habits, even if there were the power. When we remember that children are every minute observing for themselves, we recognise how necessary it is that parents and teachers should direct this observation into proper channels, and see that it is thorough, as well as that proper deductions are made.

Another important principle is that the child can observe and use his senses long before he is able to reason and draw conclusions. We do not wait until the child is old enough to

reason before we teach him that twice two makes four. Observation must be taught at first mainly through the senses only; reason will come all in good time to aid him to build up further knowledge from the foundations we have laid, as it were, by rote. Give the child, then, a good sensory education as a foundation—a good stock-in-trade. You thereby will initiate the development of potentialities which perhaps will astonish you, and certainly you will make him agreeable material for the teacher to work upon.

The best school for the training of the senses is that of Nature. The men who have produced work which neither this nor any subsequent age can excel—Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Bunyan, Newton, Darwin, Bessemer, Watts and Edison, read nature, either in field, workshop or laboratory, before books. The child must be brought into direct contact with nature to hear, see, feel, smell and touch—to question with every sense—for himself. Most of our great men have been country-bred. But all children cannot be brought up in the country, nor can town children always be taken out to the country as much as one would like. Nor, unfortunately, are all parents by any means good observers themselves—for of course parents are the natural trainers of the senses of young children. Much may be done in towns by bringing natural objects to the child. The kindergarten is a small step in the right direction, but much depends upon the personal character of the mistress. As parents we ought to be able to recognise the means for education lying about us in our environment—wherever it be, whether in town or country. But we must reserve further discussion on this subject, which I hope some other member of our branch will some day initiate.

Our senses have been given us to use; not to allow to lie latent, nor yet to abuse. We are meant to enjoy by them all that lies around us; the dreadful idea that there is something of the devil in all sensory enjoyment has passed away. The potentialities waiting to be drawn out into powers in every child are being recognised, and I firmly believe that greater possibilities are being thereby opened up for the individual and for the race.

> "I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
> And the minds of men are widened with the process of the suns."